

Triumphant Spirit

By LORI COOPER
Special to the Sun

Spirit Synott doesn't have to work very hard to live up to her name.

This 31-year-old Women on the Move nominee — Spirit is the pseudonym she adopted in high school to sign her artwork — has learned to overcome obstacles and demonstrate leadership skills like few others her age.

Her resume — full-time Ontario College of Art student, fashion designer, visual artist, model, public speaker, writer, musician, self-defence instructor and charity supporter — barely covers all she's accomplished.

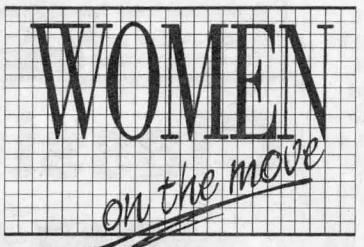
Synott, born in Toronto, is confined to a wheelchair because of spina bifida — a congenital condition affecting the vertebrae and spinal column — but it hasn't curbed her drive, ambition and genuine talents.

"I'm not shy," she says. "When you want to integrate into society, you just have to go and do it."

Synott classifies herself as a "communications specialist," citing that her artistry, music composition and other talents help in her ultimate goal of creating awareness.

"I feel very strongly about the integration of all people," she says. "Everyone has something to offer and we all have a right to be heard."

She has been active in fighting for access — attitudinal and physical — everywhere she turns. She has just grad-



uated from OCA and during her five years of study, she constantly fought to get from place to place and to educate her peers to be sensitive to her special needs.

Synott spent the past school year in OCA's off-campus program in Florence, Italy — "a totally inaccessible city" in terms of its architecture.

"I really took Italy by storm. I think I surprised a lot of people by integrating right into the community, learning the language, asking for help. I didn't go to change Italy ... I went to learn about expressing myself."

Now, she's the first North American student (from 64 universities and colleges) who has used a wheelchair to tackle the Renaissance city.

Back home, the petite, fair-haired Synott, the youngest of six children, is busy consolidating 18 journals she kept in Florence. Writing is an everyday labor of love for her, in between her ongoing art efforts and modelling stints.

Synott is also an active public speaker for charitable causes, including the Disabled Women's Network, WENDO (self-defence classes she's taught for both able bodied and disabled women) and the Endangered Animal Sanctuary.

"I can relate to the animals being locked in a cage. I think sometimes that's how people view me in the wheelchair."

Many people with disabilities get treated as "less valuable" than able-bodied people, she says. "We have the same desires and needs as everyone else."

"I want to stress the point that you can't catch a disease just by talking to someone, although the disabled are the only minority you can join at any time."

Her cozy apartment is filled with self-portraits and images of a couple romantically intertwined on a wheelchair, and she tends to incorporate life as it is for her into her work. She admits her disability has opened certain doors, "but I don't want my whole life to be about spina bifida."

Synott works out at Variety Village regularly, drives a van with hand controls and frequently goes out dancing with her friends, doing "wheelies" on the dance floor.

"I don't think I'm better than anybody else," she says. "Nothing is handed to anyone. We all have to work at it. I do what I do because nobody will do it for me, and I focus on what I have, not what I don't have."



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— Spirit Synott

WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Nominations close Friday, Nov. 10, so fill out this coupon to nominate your choice for top working woman. Send to the Sun, c/o Life, 333 King St. E., Toronto M5A 3X5, or fax to Women on the Move 947-2446.

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Remember to attach a brief note telling why your nominee should be considered for the Sun's Women on the Move celebration.

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